The Socialization of the Power Elite in an American Boarding School

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Senior Anthropology Thesis 2011

5/13/2011
Abstract:

By examining how two Chinese female students at The Founders School adjust to the demands of an elite boarding school environment, as well as my own personal experiences of socialization when I was student at Founders, this thesis attempts to determine what influences a student’s place in and relationship to the social hierarchy of the hegemonic culture of Founders. Additionally this thesis looks at what the students’ position—in particular their regional and class origins in China, the intensity of their nationalism and relationship to elite internationalism—means for the way that they interact with the school. In particular, I look at the domains of dress, use of school space, and participation in gossip as key sites for the expression and structuring of this interaction. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, I show how previous structurally-determined life experiences ease or hinder the transition into what I call after Michel Foucault the "total institution" of the U.S. prep school.
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INTRODUCTION

TOPIC AND ETHNOGRAPHER

The topic of this thesis, the socialization of Mainland Chinese students at an American boarding school, is a product of my experiences in life. I attended The Founders School, the school utilized in my ethnography, from 2004 until 2007. I visited China in 2008 for the Summer Olympics and worked in China during the summers of 2009 and 2010. The question of this thesis is how students’ background affects the socialization process for themselves at a school steeped in a Western elite hegemonic culture. I have focused my study by writing an ethnography on Chinese students assimilating at Founders, focusing on how their experience at the school has been shaped by their background; nationally, socially, economically and culturally.

I am a multiethnic male from Washington, D.C. I am part Black, White, Native American, Indian and Panamanian. My father is a successful journalist and my mother is a retired social worker. My family is considered upper class. My parents are in the highest tax bracket in America. I was raised and brought up around other wealthy children in top private schools. The youngest of three children, I went to Founders in 2004 when I was 15. I am the only child in my family to go to boarding school. My father went to Oakwood Friends, a Quaker boarding school in Poughkeepsie, New York. The primary reason for me attending Founders was to play ice hockey and develop more of a social life. I had exceeded the competition in my area and Prep School hockey is considered one of the top high school hockey leagues in the country. At home, when I was not in school, I was traveling to play
hockey. The travel removed me from many after school activities and impacted my school social life as well as schoolwork. Going to Founders enabled me to play hockey at a high level, continue to develop as a student as well as develop into a better-rounded social person since the school supported hockey. The hockey coach at Founders supported my application to the school and was assigned to be my advisor when I arrived. Hockey was not the only reason I was accepted at Founders but it was a factor among many. Once arriving to Founders I realized that I was not going to be a hockey star there. Founders like many other boarding schools, recruits athletes from around the world. The Founders’ men’s soccer team consists of players from Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica as well as America and other countries. The hockey team recruits from all over the US and Canada. I was not good enough to be the best hockey player against all the competition there. Still my three years there were very rewarding. I became a better-socialized person, who had more to talk about than sports and matured beyond throwing fits when not getting my way along with becoming better educated. The disappointment I suffered from not being a hockey star taught me how to handle adversity, treat defeat and that people do not solely judge a person on their athlete prowess (something I thought prior to Founders).

While at Founders I knew many of the Chinese students enrolled but hung out with few of them. At best I could have been considered an acquaintance of some them. Nevertheless when I went to China I contacted some of them to build a relationship, since they were the only people I knew in China. I developed a strong friendship with a couple of them. During my friendships, I learned more about each
student and their experience at Founders. Each of these Chinese friends from Founders has had a different experience at the school. Regardless of the experience having been negative or positive, they all agree that Founders changed them. Most viewed Founders as a combination of negative and positive experiences.

I have an abiding affection for my high school. I am very grateful for how the school, in my opinion, realigned the focuses of my life to ones more fitting with the person who I want to be, this could be a product of the hegemonic culture though. The disappointments and joys I experienced at Founders were experiences that have helped me mature and learn what truly makes me happy. I fit in well to hegemonic culture of Founders. I believed while I was there, that if a student worked to fit into the school, the school would work to improve the student. Working to fit into the school meant that one would not try to disrupt the hierarchies or institutions of the school. Those that did attempt to disturb the structures that the school operates upon, I believed, were not proper agents of the school. I saw them as cancers that were against the good of the school. I have seen that this is not a fact, as I believed it was when I attended Founders. I was a young student trying to live and succeed. I believed that the path laid before me by Founders would make me happy and successful. In many ways it did, but I never considered those students who, Founders did not provide the proper path for. Due to the fact that I am writing an auto-ethnography, I was able to blend in the student spaces much better than if I did not know the school. But with my increase comfort in the space came the risk of oversight. I have been habituated to the habitus of Founders, so there are actions and reactions that take place on the campus that I do
not think to ask questions about. If I did not attend Founders I believe that I would not have been as welcomed to study the place as I was. Much of my research exposed me to this different type of student; the kind I did not associate with while at Founders. Even though I was able to expand my views of Founders students, I still cannot say that I did not overlook aspects of the student’s lives.

I believe that my time at Founders was life changing for me. My dress, behavior, intellectual curiosity and demeanor all have been strongly shaped by my time there. The other primary influence on me as a person happened at home, prior to Founders. As a child I was taken to museums, to increase my intellectual curiosity and understanding for art. I accompanied my parents on trips around the US and world, which expanding what I knew and had seen. My parents socialized me with other wealthy children and adults. I was taught through these interactions how to interact with wealth and those that had it, informally and formally. What I learned at home played a large role in me being able to adapt quickly to the hegemonic culture of Founders. But what I learned at home was not the complete will of my parents. They had structural pressures affecting the way they raised me. I will not enter into what these pressures were. By being able to quickly fit into Founders I was able to feel comfortable enough to make the most of my experience at the school. The Founders’ experience is aimed at students with prior habituation to a Western upper class habitus, especially in the social aspects of the experience. The Founders experience is a combination of academic and social education.

While I lived in China I was fortunate enough to make friends with a diverse group of people. I had Chinese friends, primarily students, who had no American
education, some with college experience in the States and a few with high school experience in the States. The students who had no American education did not behave like the students who had an American education. The behavioral difference between the pupils who attended high school in America and those without an American education was the most extreme. There was even a difference between those students who had studied in college in the states and those who had studied in high school in America. The differences that I noticed made me think about my high school experience, and how I believe that my experience at Founders shaped the way that I relate and interact with others. During my time there I transferred from being the child that has to be asked a question to participate in conversations with adults to a young adult who actively ask questions and engages with adults. I also understood how better to relate to my peers that did not play sports with me. In other words Founders broaden my knowledge the world and of myself to the point where I have become better able to interact with others of my social class.

During the summer of 2009, I wrote an article for China Daily on two Chinese students who attended different American boarding schools. The article focused on the dual identity of the students. The two identities were their American one and their Chinese one. The article showed how the students acted differently around Americans than they did around the Chinese. After writing this article I became interested in the process that led to the students forming an American identity, which I believe is the product of their respective boarding schools.

To better understand how background affects the socialization process for students at a school steeped in Western elite culture, I studied Chinese students at
The Founders School. I believe that the ways in which they become habituated to the habitus of Founders is based on their personal backgrounds. To test this hypothesis I studied the various ways in which Chinese students fit into the hegemonic culture of Founders. Looking primarily at the non-academic aspect of the school, much like John Devine in “Maximum Security, The Culture of Violence in Inner-City Schools.”

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT BOARDING SCHOOLS

Mainland Chinese students at American boarding schools are a new phenomenon. Ever since the 20th century, boarding schools have been expanding the pool of students from which they enroll. Whether it was by accepting scholarship students, blacks or girls, boarding schools have been slowly becoming more diverse places. The latest trend is international students from places other than the Western World. In a class of ten I observed at Founders there were boys from Ghana, Thailand and Peru along with girls from China, Hong Kong and South Africa. Ever since I attended Founders, the number of Mainland Chinese students has grown. Currently, there are close to twenty Mainland Chinese students at Founders, which is more than they have ever had before.

Founders has been at the forefront of the globalization of boarding schools. Currently the school has students from 34 different foreign countries and 39% of the student body is of color. The large number of foreign and minority students is not a serendipitous occurrence at Founders. Led by a head of school who is from South Africa and a head of the board of trustees who is a professor at Tsinghua
University (one of the most prestigious universities in China), Founders has embraced the globalizing world. “It’s one of our goals to attract an international student body since that is what the students will be interacting with when they graduate,” said David Robinson, the Coordinator of the International Program at Founders. With a head of the board who is intimately involved with China, he travels there every two weeks; Founders has made it a priority to attract the brightest Chinese students.

Founders has done a number of things that have made it an attractive destination for foreign students. Being a top academic boarding school in the US is the most attractive part of the school, for most foreigners. Founders has strong sports to attract international athletes. The school also tries to be as foreign as possible, by involving itself in international programs that expand the education of the students. Such as, Round Square, an association of more than 70 schools in 15 countries around the world that promotes global engagement through many events, most specifically through a conference that takes place once a year at a member school. There are only 3 American schools in Round Square, which makes Founders membership more unique. Founders also has school year abroad and foreign service trips. In 2009 an alumni believed that Antarctica was the last unexplored land in the world so he sent half the school to Antarctica for two weeks. This trip allowed students to see lands that are as unaffected by humans as possible, to expand the idea of human impact for the students. Founders makes its self as global as it can while still maintaining the total institution aspect of being a small boarding
school in Connecticut. The opportunities to experience more than one's local community attracted many of the foreign students I talked to, to Founders.

The internationalism of Founders is not the reason that most Chinese students looked to come to high school in the states. A large percentage of the Chinese students viewed America as a way to make themselves more rounded people, a way to get out of the test oriented system in China and a way to be set up to work and live in America. Students regularly stressed to me throughout their interactions that coming to America allowed them to try new interest and meet new people. They saw this diversifying of whom they know and what they do as a way to make themselves “better-rounded” people, who would know more than just how to study. The Chinese high school system is something that many students want to escape. Chinese high school seniors must take an exam called the Gao Kao to gain acceptance into college. The exam is a three-day ordeal that the last two years of high school is spent preparing for. Many students leave the Chinese educational system to avoid the Gao Kao. The last reason is that coming to high school in America is seen as a way to better prepare oneself for college in America and life in America. Coming to Founders does not necessarily mean that a Chinese student has a leg up on a student who studied at home when it comes to getting into American colleges. But, most of the time the students feel that they fit in to the social scene better at the schools they end up enrolling in than the Chinese students who did not do school in the States prior to enrolling in an American University.
FRAMEWORK

I used two texts to frame my thesis. The first is “America’s Elite Boarding Schools,” by Peter W. Cookson Jr and Caroline Hodges Persell. The second is “Maximum Security: The Culture of Violence in Inner-City Schools” by John Devine. Cookson’s book is a macro ethnography on boarding schools, focusing on American boarding schools. Published in 1985 the book is very effective at situating boarding schools in larger field of education. I heavily used the books definition of boarding schools when situating Founders among other schools. The text also summarizes the types of students that attend these schools. Much of what the book discussed I saw during my fieldwork. There were some differences, though many of them were based on the twenty-five year gap between the publication of the book and my research. “Preparing for Power,” is a necessary book for those studying boarding schools. Its most important aspect is the way that the book is able to detail the purpose of these unique schools; that is as class training for the children of wealth.

I use Devine’s book as a comparison throughout my thesis. Devine’s book is an ethnography on the worst schools in New York City. He spent ten years studying a number of schools. I use his ideas of mind-body teaching as well as his style of studying the non-classroom aspects of schools. While Devine’s ethnography was on drastically different schools than Founders, his way of studying a school was a guide to me when I was studying Founders. I use his text throughout my thesis as a way of comparing not only my students to students at other schools but also as a way to compare my approach as an amateur ethnography to a published ethnographer. Devine situated my approach to studying a school.
For a background on the history of a similar school I used "Hotchkiss a Chronicle of an American School," by Ernest Kolowrat. The book was commissioned by Hotchkiss, for its centennial. Due to the schools influence in the production of the book, it is noticeably biased, “When the old apologetics would no longer do, a new, updated apologetics had to be articulated.” (Lemisch 2004) Lemisch, a Hotchkiss alumnus from the fifties, goes to great length to taint the rose color lens that Kolowrat uses to portray Hotchkiss’ history. Even though Lemisch believes that Kolowrat’s work is creating new excuses for the school so that the history of the institution does not appear unscrupulous, Lemisch still views Kolowrat’s text as a good source of material on Founders. “The book nonetheless offers abundant anecdotal material,” (Lemisch 2004) It is the material that the book collected that was very helpful for me when researching information on Founders.

While the ethnographies of Cookson and Devine, frame my thesis, I used the theories of Foucault and Bourdieu to understand and comprehend what I observed. I used Foucault’s theories of panopticism, total institution and bio power along with Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and cultural capital to position the Chinese students place among the hegemonic culture of the total institution that is Founders.

Each theory will be expanded upon and dealt with in more depth as my thesis progresses, but I feel it necessary to give a basic explanation of each. Foucault’s theory of panopticism is based on Jeremy Bentham’s perfect prison. In Bentham’s perfect prison, each cell is positioned around a large tower than has a blinding light. The guards are situated in the tower where they can watch the inmates. The inmates are celled alone and never know when they are being
Foucault believed that this created a sensation of always being watched. "The major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." (Foucault 1995: 201) The feeling of always being observed forced the inmates to behave, for fear of reprisal, further extending the influence of power. Founders is not prison but similar to a prison in that it is a total institution; Foucault notes that panopticism works for schools as well. "If they[those under the gaze of the panopticon] are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time;"(Foucault 1995: 201) Founders, like a prison, attempts to control the students in order to direct them on the path they see fit. Teachers are everywhere they become a network of gazes that patrols the students, keeping them in line and making sure that they maintain the behavior fitting of the school.

Bio power is synonymous with having power over others. Bio power is wielded in ways other than the traditionally violent ones; persuasion is an example of bio power. It is power over others enforced as a way to help the overall good. Foucault deals with bio power while discussing biopolitics in "The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France 1978-1979.” Biopower is a way that hegemonic ideas are maintained. Foucault uses the example of states maintaining power and control over subjects by convincing them that what they are perpetuating is best for themselves. “The free play of individual interests -- compatible with the interest of each and all.” (Foucault 2008: 329)

Hegemony is the way that norms are perpetuated, thus power maintained, through non-violent methods. Gramsci defines social hegemony as,
“the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the direction imprinted on social life by the fundamental ruling class, a consent that comes into existence ‘histrocially’ from the ‘prestige’ accruing to the ruling class from its position and its function in the world of production.” (Gramsci 1957: 124)

It is the way that the bourgeois stay in control and the way that certain ethos dominates particular schools. Hegemony is what establishes the culture of a place. It is due to the hegemonic aspect of the culture at Founders, that the culture has been maintained despite the changes in its student body, head of school and faculty over the years. Hegemony through the usage of bio-power is the way that the culture of Founders is perpetuated. It is what has maintained Founders as a training ground for the future Western elite.

Bourdieu’s theory of habitus as defined by Edward Said in “Reflections On Exile And Other Essays,” is “the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitance.” (Said pg 176). This means that habitus is what people learn through experience, repetition and instruction that becomes ingrained in their life to the point of doing without thought. One way Bourdieu defines it is as

“A system of internalized embodied schemes which, having been constituted in the course of collective history, are acquired in the course of individual history and function in their practical state, for practice (and not for the sake of pure knowledge).” (Bourdieu 1986 in Clarke et al, 2003: 246)

Many of the habits of students at Founders are done without thought, yet there was a time when they reflection about these thoughtless acts. The habitus of Founders is what makes the un-engrained engrained. An example of the engrained at Founders is how the boys at the school are expected not to shower in the shower stalls, unless
there are no stall-less showers available. Showers in the male dormitories are group showers, except for one shower that is confined by a stall. No male student is told this rule but they are expected to learn by experiencing which showers are preferential to use. Another example of habitus in a dormitory is how male students are expected to poop with the stall door open when in the dormitory. There is no one agreed upon source or reason for the dorm nudity at Founders. But, all the students acknowledge the rule, whether they abide by the rule or not is different. A student standing in the social hierarchy of Founders though can be learned through how much they abide by the dormitory habitus; their own personal standing is also effected by the amount they follow the guidelines.

One of the ways that habitus is perpetuated is through the passing of cultural capital. Cultural capital can be seen as a creator of habitus. In a school the students primarily gain cultural capital from the teachers who through constant supervision and interaction with the students slowly transfers their cultural capital on how to dress, behave and socialize. Different teachers pass on different forms of cultural capital, depending on their role in the school (varsity coach, art teacher, college advisor, etc) and their relationship with the student. If a teacher is very close to a student they are more likely to pass on cultural capital to that student than one with whom they have limited contact. During my studies at Founders, I recall a moment when a dapper history teacher I was friendly with entered into a conversation with some fellow students and me about how he was wearing a Thomas Pink tie. The conversation left a strong impression on me that Thomas Pink was a desirable brand. This is an example of the exchange of cultural capital; I learned a non-
academic lesson that helps my future place among Western elites. “[Cultural capital] is a prolonged process of inculcation producing a durable training,” (Bourdieu 1990: 32) Students also transfer cultural capital with one another. This exchange of cultural capital is an important piece of schooling especially at the secondary level; it is a part of the purpose of secondary schools to properly socialize its students. “For students, the major aspect of their education seems to be social, not simply academic.” (Cookson 1985: 106) Through the constant supervision and control of student behavior, Founders is able to exchange cultural capital from the teachers to the students.

HIGH SCHOOLS AND BOARDING SCHOOLS

To better understand the shift that the Chinese students go through, it is necessary to understand what the purpose of high school is. Anthropologists, when studying high schools, tend to focus on the socialization process that is at the utmost of importance to the high school experience. Some scholars believe, that the social skills one learns in high school are more important than the academic lessons learned.

Nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and therefore, more precious, than the values given the body, made body by transubstantiation achieved by the hidden pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as “stand up straight” or don’t hold your knife in your left hand. (Bourdieu 1977: 94)

As shown through the diverse writings of various authors, the socialization process, one experiences in high school, depends on a series of variables (Chang
The most obvious variables are the location of the school, the ethnicity of the student, the socio economic class of the student and the education of the parents (Devine 1996, Cookson 1985, Hemmings 2004). Each variable affects the way the student behaves with peers and authority, is taught and learns how to behave and what aspirations they have.

Boarding schools encourage diversity, even though their culture can be isolating towards these non-ethnically dominant students. Asian pupils in American schools can feel restricted by the stereotypes place upon them. While many high schoolers end up formulating a personality that fits a particular stereotype (aka the jock, nerd, goth, etc.), there are often fewer stereotypes that feel available to non-whites. This pigeon holing of the students can either have a sedating effect, where the students fulfill the stereotype quietly or it can have just the opposite effect where students will rebel against the structure of their stereotype (Lei 2003).

The culture of boarding schools is often maintained through the idea that schools primary function is to produce gentlemen and ladies, class exclusion (Levine 1980, Cookson 1985). The idea of class exclusion is archaic. It borrows its origins from the boarding schools of England such as Eton College. William Cory, an Eton Master said “at a great school it is not just knowledge that is acquired, nor even the 'shadow of lost knowledge' that later protects you from many illusions, but most importantly the ‘arts and habits that last for a lifetime.’” (in his Eton Reform II as adapted by George Lyttleton in writing to Rupert Hart-Davis William Cory) These arts and habits are those intangibles that set a person up for life among the elite. While the idea of class exclusion might be archaic, the schools still function with the
same aim they did hundreds of years ago; preparing their students to be the future of elites of the world. For this reason, the teachers at these schools invest more interest in non-academic aspects of their student’s lives than public schools or day schools. Teachers from Devine’s study avoid non academic aspects of the students lives, an example is when Devine asked security guards at one of the schools, “if any of the teachers acted as disciplinarians in the hallway they said it would be wonderful if each teacher did that.” (Devine 1996: 93) By being more involved in all the aspects of the students lives, teachers at Founders can help guide the students in all aspects of life like their studies and their behavior, something Devine sees as lacking in the public schools he studied. Examples of this are the teachers living with the students, coaching them on the field and guided the students in and outside of the classroom, this is a kind of mind-body role (Devine, 1996) that allows students to get a social and academic education out of their schooling. The encompassing interactions with the students, helps make Founders a total institution.

“There are four central aspects of life in a ‘total institution.’: (1) all activities are conducted in the same place under a single authority; (2) daily life is carried out in the immediate company of others; (3) life is tightly scheduled and fixed by a set of formal rules; and (4) all activities are designed purportedly to fulfill the official aims of the institution.” (35 Cookson 1985)

Founders, like most boarding schools, by fulfilling all these requirements is a total institution, since its overall aim is to educate students academically as well as socially by being intimately involved in the minutest details of the students lives. By removing students from their parents and home, Founders, like other elite boarding
schools, has “played an important role in the formation and maintenance of an
American elite upper class.” (Cookson 1985: 24). Foucault discussed total
institutions in great depth in his book “Discipline and Punish.” He dissects the
purpose of a total institution by using a prison, but many of the same ideas can be
extended to boarding schools. Foucault describes total institutions as a place where,

“Procedures were being elaborated for distributing individuals, fixing
them in space, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in
time and forces, training their bodies, coding their continuous
behavior, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them
an apparatus of observation, registration and recording, constituting
on them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralized. The
general form of an apparatus intended to render individuals docile
and useful, by means of precise work upon their bodies.” (Foucault
1995: 231)

By being closely watched during most times of the day, the students at
Founders are being shaped by their time there away from “the contamination
of the city.” (Cookson 1985: 32)

High Schools have a strong social hierarchy (Lei 2003, Chang 1992). This
social hierarchy is affected by behavior at school and outside of it. The social
hierarchy determines where people eat lunch, whom they hang out with, what they
do in their leisure time and how hard they study. Founders, is not immune to having
a social hierarchy. Part of my research was positioning the students I studied in the
social hierarchy of Founders. Understanding the global phenomenon of hierarchy
allowed me to understand what was unique about the Founders hierarchy.

There is very little anthropologic work on elite schooling, when compared to
the plethora of research that has been done on remedial or normal forms of
schooling. The exclusivity is a barrier to most anthropologists. The schools are
exclusive due to their private nature. They are not public spheres where it is simple for an ethnographer to do participant observation and the institution themselves are not particularly open to being studied by outsiders. Laura Nader gives an example of this in her essay “Up the Anthropologist—Perspectives gained from Studying Up,” when she discusses a law firm that prohibited ethnographers from studying the firm. To be able to properly study the elite school the anthropologist must understand the habitus of a place in order to blend in and be able to relate with the students. With my knowledge of the habitus of Founders, I was able to quickly fit in to the place allowing me to focus on my research while I was there. Elite schools also are private institutions often wary of outsiders. Being such exclusive places and serving such a small percentage of the population means that anthropologists have only truly taken a passing looking at elite schooling.

The first chapter of my work will orient the reader to Founders as a place and to the students I studied. I will introduce students and explain their backgrounds. The second chapter will focus on the students’ interactions in the hallways of Founders. Through my interviews and conversation with the Chinese students I will detail how they described themselves as a member of the Founders community and as a Chinese person. The third chapter is on being Chinese at Founders how it affects the students, those around them and the socialization process. I did two stints of fieldwork for this ethnography. The first was in early February, when I spent three days there making initial introductions. The second visit was in early March, I went for four days and spent two days shadowing two students.
Chapter 1: Orientation

THE SCHOOL

A two and a half hour drive away from New York City and a three and a half hour drive away from Boston lies a 810 acre secluded part of New England that is home to The Founders School. The 595-student boarding school is nestled in the hills of the Berkshire Mountains. Situated next to one of the deepest lakes in New England, Founders is home to multiple ponds and lakes, woods as well as a plethora of wild animals. Founders embraces its isolation; it is a part of the total institution aspect of the school. The distance from a metropolitan area allows the school to dominate the students time and schedule while also acting as a way to keep students on campus; there is no where else to go nearby.

The campus is built to allow the students to become accustom to being around wealth and nice things. “Part of a prep school education is the acquisition of taste... Prep school students grow up in splendor as part of learning the intricacies of high culture.” (Cookson 1985: 28) Founders is no different from most other elite boarding schools, in that it sees its role in educating students in the social aspect life, which, because of class preparation, includes interacting around wealth. The wealth on display at the campus is almost immediately apparent. The entrance to the school is called the Robertson Memorial Gate. It is two ornately classical brick structures with carved stone tops, which stand a little more than 15 feet tall and sit on either side of the drive to the main building. The detail that is shown on the two structures is remarkable and noteworthy, especially since it is merely a marker of
the entrance. It seems more fitting of a large mansion in Newport than a high school in Connecticut, yet it is the first sign that this is a well cared for school that is not utilitarian in its design. Devine paints a bleak picture of the inner city schools he studied.

“Almost all the schools, as already indicated, are situated in marginalized neighborhoods. In some of them, students pass lots filled with ten-foot high mound of garbage that has spilled onto the sidewalks and into the street. Crack houses may be sighted within a block of the school. Graffiti is ubiquitous. Entering the building, students will normally be diverted away from the main lobby and shunted to a side entrance (for better crowd control), where they will wait, hundreds at a time, to meet the security guards who introduce them to the first rites de passage of a New York City high school: the wizardry of identity card machines, metal detectors, X-ray machines, walkie talkies, magnetic door locks and a host of other forms of “security” technology.” (Devine 1996: 26)

Devine’s description of the entrance to many of these schools shows the different culture of Founders, compared the inner city schools as seen through the aesthetic of the place, buildings and campuses. Founders and other boarding schools like it are a unique place that develops students in ways that cannot be offered by day schools.

The Robertson Memorial Gate is the first sign of wealth seen by a visitor of the school, but it is not the last sign of wealth a visitor would notice. Signs of wealth are everywhere at Founders from the portraits that line the hallways of the main building to the wood paneling that lines the walls of the dorms and academic buildings. There was a story told to me when I was a student about how when a former head of school had added chrome accents to the traditionally designed mahogany interior of the head of school’s house, it was the straw that broke the
camels back and he was pushed out. This story demonstrates the importance that Founders places on appearance of the buildings. Stories such as these, stress the value of maintaining appearances. By hearing stories such as this students are absorbing cultural capital from the teller of the story. “The cultural capital that prep school students accumulate in boarding schools is a treasure trove of skills and status symbols that can be used in later life.” (Cookson 1986: 30) The buildings are what help Founders maintain its character regardless of changes by the faculty, students and staff. This maintenance of character over the years helps maintain the hegemonic culture of the institution.

Value is placed on more than just the buildings at Founders. The students, facility and any other visitor to the school are required to dress properly, which is no sneakers, khakis or dress slacks, a tie and blazer for the boys and equivalent for girls. The dress code at Founders does not go to the point of the stating the color of items or mandating a school patch on the clothes. Yet, the place of students in the social hierarchy of Founders was apparent to me by the types of clothing they wore. Those who were not in colorful pastels or classically dressed as a ‘prep,’ seemed to hang on the social fringe or not at the top of the social hierarchy. “Preppy is a style that came about from the New England preparatory schools, conservative protestant values and social stratification all combined to create an environment which produced the uniform we know today as the preppy look.” (Hogan 2008) The styles worn by the students were not inexpensive. Expensive companies like Ralph Laruen, Tory Burch and Vineyard Vines seemed to be a must for students to own if they wanted to blend into the crowd. While students dressed in expensive fashions,
it seemed to be improper etiquette to be completely neat and clean. Many boys I witnessed wore stained coats or khakis. Rarely was a tie pulled tight, or the top button of an Oxford fastened. They treated the clothes they owned as if they were cheap, or as if they couldn’t afford more clothes, yet this look is by design. Sport jackets were flung on benches or the floor of the hallway. Many of the edges of the clothing seemed frayed or distressed. These are children who can afford new clothes, they are happy with their tattered mistreated clothes. It is a form of student rebellion against the neat and clean appearance of the school (Cookson 1985).

Another form of rebellion against the strict dress code is the wearing of sandals or work boots by the students. Rainbow brand flip-flops and Timberland brand work boots were on the feet of about half of the students during my field work at Founders. Because the school only dictates that the students may not wear sneakers, it is an acceptable form of rebellion for students to wear these non-dress shoes. Teachers and staff tended to wear classic prep shoes, like suede bucks. The shoes of most of the teachers wear were muted colors and looked older. None of the teachers wore loud shoes or inappropriate shoes.

Dressing fancier or less fancy brings attention to the student, which places the student outside of the hegemonic culture of Founders and the social hierarchy. As one of the Chinese students I was shadowing showed me around the school, she pointed to a group of students seated away from the main hallway on a cluster of couches. Before she could say anything about the students I noticed that they were adorned in a wide variety of clothing styles that fit the dress code, but did not fit the “student dress code.” I immediately knew that this was a place called the “odd
"odd quad." The location of the “odd quad,” had moved since I was a student at Founders but I immediately noticed the students as outsiders. The student I was shadowing told me that those couches were called the “odd quad.” Then she asked me if knew what that meant and if there had been something like it when I went there. I told her that ever since I had been at Founders there had always been an “odd quad.” The “odd quad,” is a section of main building, located on the lower level near the theater. Many of the students in the “odd quad,” are actors or theater tech people. The students that make up the “odd quad,” do not hang out in the Dean’s Wing (where most of the students who are habituated to the hegemonic culture of Founders hand out). There is not one specific type of student who frequents the odd quad, instead they are all outsiders and bond in through their lack of fitting in.

The “odd quad,” is not the only area of seating around main building that is prescribed by the culture of Founders. If one enters the main doors of main building, which are some of the least used doors of the building, walks past the art gallery on the left they will notice the student center on their right before they reach the rotunda that lies straight ahead. The student center is large room equipped with six to eight large couches and many large chairs. There is a room off to the side of the student center where there is a television and ping-pong table. The student center is one of the nicest places for students to relax during their free time, yet it is allotted as the Preps territory. Founders, like a normal American high school, has four grade levels. Unlike a normal American high school however, the nomenclature of the grades is different; freshmen are preps, sophomores are lower middles (lower mids), juniors are upper middles (upper mids) and seniors are seniors. Each grade
has a pre assigned area of main building, which along with the snack bar serves as
the main gathering point for that grade. The Preps have the student center; the
lower mids have two hard wooden benches that lie right outside of the student
center if one uses the doors opposite the Dean’s Wing. If one continues to walk
towards the snack bar, the three benches in front of the snack bar window make up
upper mid benches. Directly across the hall from upper mid benches next the
windows that look out over main circle and senior grass are the senior couches.
Seniors are the only grade besides for preps to have cushions on their seats.

No one knows when are or why the seating became like it is, but there are a
number of reasons why it makes sense. The student center the nicest of the areas is
given to the preps since it is often used as the area for dances or other events on the
weekend, meaning that one cannot hang out there while the events are taking place.
It is the largest space that any class claims partially because all preps tend to hang
out in the student center. As students get older, the non-cool students tend to not
frequent main hallway as a place to socialize. This might be a cause of the lack of
seating at lower mid benches or it could just be a natural process that happens. The
student center is removed from main hallway, a place where grades and teacher
mingle. Main hallway is the stretch of hallway that runs from the rotunda to the
dining hall, passing the deans wing, the student center, all class zones, the snack bar
and the library. The best available seats in main hallway go to the seniors. During
the evening it is not unusual to see teachers fraternizing with the seniors in senior
quad. During the day these spaces are used to socialize as well as on occasion do
work (though no serious work is ever accomplished). The upper mid benches are
the largest grouping of seats in the main hallway, while they are not as comfortable as senior couches, the upper mid benches look out onto the hallway and senior couches. The large space and the outward vantage point mean that upper mid benches are preferential to the lower mid benches. The worst spot on the main hallway is lower mid benches, in a corner semi removed from interactions with the seniors and upper mids, the lower mid benches are in close proximity to the preps and have the least amount of seating available to them. It is not unusual to spot a student or two sitting on the floor if there are no seats available. It is stepping out of tradition if a lowerclassmen sits in the area of a higher class without permission from a member of that class. That permission is only temporary if given and must be re-asked each time the lowerclassmen attempts to sit with upperclassmen. Upperclassmen may sit wherever they please whether or not they have been invited.

The areas that students hang out in are treated like living rooms in most homes. Students can be found lounging, with feet on the furniture, while eating. Bags are often strewed across the floor; computers are left out, in grade areas. Theft is not a problem in main building especially in main hallway where people always are. A casual atmosphere is created by the students, in a very formal setting.

The open display of wealth can feel ostentatious or snobby, since everything from the buildings to the students seems to have been crafted out of money. But because money is something that is assumed personal wealth is not something talked of often. It is looked down upon when brought up in conversation or when a student seems to brag about their wealth. “ I don’t think that money plays a role
here in terms of status... you usual don’t know who the scholarship students are.” (Kolowrat 1992: 480) Money is also looked down upon when talked about because the students have no use for it on campus. “Because everything is provided for the elite student there is no need to carry much cash, and a consequence of a cashless society is that nobody talks directly about money.” (Cookson 1985:28) Boarding schools are unique in their ability to be cashless societies. In the schools Devine researched, money was a more discussed issue, “Some girl only like you if you got money and a car.” (Devine 1996: 174) Money in these less affluent schools is something that student feel like they need to prove that they have. In my research I found that while Founders was a cashless society, in that money was not frequently dealt with, everything from the styles one wore to the discussion of vacation plans gave subtle hints of family wealth or lack there of. These subtle signs of wealth seem in contradiction with the idea that wealth is not talked about. While the two ideas may seem at odds with one another, they actually are symbiotic; since fancy vacations and nice clothes can be afforded by the majority of the students at the school the discussion of trips or wearing of expensive clothes is not understood by most as an ostentatious sign of wealth. Instead they are understood to be the norm. The norm being things that only the wealthy can enjoy can make students who do not have as much feel isolated or like outsiders.

Boarding schools make up a small percentage of high schools in America. Approximately only 10% of high school students are enrolled in private schools. Of those enrolled at private schools about 20% attend a boarding school (Cookson 1985: 3). According to Cookson a boarding is such if it fulfills seven requirements;
1. The private secondary boarding school is one in which at least half the students live during the year. Most of the schools are situated in rural or semirural settings. While the students are at school it is responsible for their welfare – in loco parentis or in place of the parents.

2. The school is independent from state and local authorities.

3. The school is organized as a non-profit corporation

4. The school charges fees

5. The school’s ultimate policy decisions are made by a self-perpetuating board of trustees that appoints the head, who in turn appoints the teachers and other staff and administrators.

6. The school is organized for college bound students

7. The school is part of an informal hierarchy with the older eastern schools setting the standard. (Cookson 1985: 34-35)

But Founders, is not the same as just any old boarding school. According to Cookson, Founders is considered to be a “select 16” boarding school. The list consists of the oldest and most traditional boarding schools on the East Coast, with most concentrated in New England. Being a “select 16,” boarding school means that the school, “serves the sociological function of differentiating the upper classes from the rest of the population.”(Cookson 1985: 43). Schools that are considered to be a select 16 school are of three defining types, Academies, Episcopal, or Entrepreneurial, depending on their founding. Founders is considered to be an entrepreneurial school, which means that the school has always been non denominational, enrolls the children of business leaders, is a modest size and is considered to be in between the strict discipline of church schools and the freedom of the larger academies.

Founders, has a yearly tuition of $41,885. But with a need blind acceptance policy they attempt to accept the best potential pupils possible. The need blind acceptance policy is possible because of Founders’ large endowment, $382 million.
“To be accepted into a private school is to be accepted into a social club, or more generally speaking, a status group that is defined as a group of people who feel a sense of social similarity.” (Cookson 1985: 22). But Founders’ definition of best is not purely a mathematical equation of test scores and grades. Founders, like most private American schools looks at student’s admission essays, their interview along with test and grades. Founders has an intense application process that includes, an application with a writing sample, essays pertaining to Founders, an interview and the SSAT. This extreme application process is a stark contrast to the acceptance process seen in Devine’s study. In Devine’s study the students try to go anywhere but to those lower tier schools, only going if in the end they cannot go anywhere else. “The ideal student is one who has a sense of purpose.” (Kolowrat 1992: 476) At Founders, they attempt to create a student body where each student can contribute to the school in different ways. They have athletes, academics, linguistic and writers. There is no one type of student that Founders is searching for, by making their application process all encompassing they are widen the pool from which they draw allowing each student to prove their right to be at the school through more than just academics. Simultaneously, by not setting a strict academic requirement for entrance, like is the norm in China for colleges; Founders is able to accept legacy students that might not otherwise be accepted. “The reality of life in a boarding school which is independently funded by tuition and an annual fund is that alumni and alumnae support is crucial. I don’t think you can discount the kind of attention you should pay to their children’s application.” (Kolowrat 1992: 475) The preceding quote shows the importance placed on legacy applications, which
increases school fund raising and is one of the reasons for the unspecific application requirements in terms of academic qualifications.

Founders has come a long way since the days of when a letter from the Head of School could get a student into any Ivy League institution. Founders was established as a feeder school into an Ivy League University. Most of the graduates from Founders attended an Ivy League school upon graduation up until the middle of the 20th century. For most students the college process was just a matter of telling the headmaster where he wanted to attend; this is no longer the case. Founders in theory could still have most of its graduating classes attend Ivies. But that is not how the school wishes to operate. “If we only take the brightest kids so we get a high acceptance rate at Yale, Harvard and Princeton then I think you lose sight of the purpose of the school.”(Kolowrat 1992: 476) The school does not just look at its college matriculation list to determine the success of the school. The school bases its success on the experience that the students have while at Founders. Only focusing on academics would not truly embodied the total aspect design of Founders. The idea of a total institution is that it shapes and molds its attendees. If the school did not focus on the social aspect of education, in the selection of students, then Founders would be ignoring the role the faculty play as mind body instructors (Devine 1996), whose goal it is to educate the students in subjects that will prepare them for college as well as try to create gentlemen and ladies out of the pupils. “To be a gentleman a person of character—that is the most important thing we can teach you.” (Kolowrat 1992: 33) George Van Santvoord, the longest serving headmaster in Founders history, said this quote when reprimanding a student who
he believed was not acting in a way befitting of a gentleman. The term gentleman in
the preceding quote does not just mean a well-mannered person; it means a person
who has been properly socialized to be a member of the elite upper class in America.
When thinking about Founders it is important to remember that it was created like
most other elite boarding schools as a way to perpetuate the upper class. Each
student was seen as a future solider that would strengthen the upper class; but first
they had to learn how to behave like a person of wealth.

THE STUDENTS

The average Founders’ student is the child of a banker, with most coming
from the New York City area. They have been to top pre-prep schools, which have
prepared the student for the transition to Founders. Many of the students are
legacies, so they come to the school knowing a little bit about what they are
entering. For most of the students, it has been their parents plan all along to send
them to a school like Founders and the students have internalized the desire to go to
Founders; therefore they are happy to be attending. A part of the internalization
process is the sports that many of the students choose to pursue before they are
even old enough to apply to high school such as sailing, lacrosse, hockey, golf and
tennis. By preparing to go to a boarding school by doing activities that will be
favorably looked upon while there, many of the students have been preparing for
elite status their whole lives are now more intimately connected with other students
like themselves through participating in the total institution that is Founders. Class
cohesion is formed through similar interest and struggles while at school. The
interests are what create the initial bond between students, while the struggles and daily life continue to increase the bond.

I interviewed nine Chinese students at Founders. From the nine I interviewed I selected two to shadow. When selecting students to shadow I selected two different students who both seemed excited about my research; therefore more likely to be willing to expose their lives to me.

The first student I choose to study was 16-year-old Samantha Mo, a girl I met in Beijing, China, where she was interning with a Chinese Investment bank. Samantha's father is a wealthy Chinese businessman and her mother a housewife. Unlike most urban Chinese she has a younger brother. Her parents decided that they could afford to pay the fees, imposed by the Chinese government, for having an extra child. Samantha was born and grew up in Shanghai, China. Her parents studied in America themselves for a period of time, so when she was born she was given a Chinese and English name. She attended international school in Shanghai until she came to Founders. Shanghai is a very European city. Since the turn of the 20th Century Shanghai, as a result of the Opium Wars, there has been a large European influence. Today the influence can be seen in the classic European architecture along the Bund or the large number of non-Chinese faces that populate the center of the city. Shanghai is the center of China’s financial sector, which attracts many foreigners. Samantha is a product of this very non-Chinese environment, where English can be heard all around the downtown. Her sports activities at Founders reflect this lack of Chinese to her; she played JV volleyball in
the fall, did walking in the winter and will play beach volleyball in the spring. She is a member of the Blue and White club (the school spirit club).

The second student I choose to study was 19-year-old Mindy Qian. Mindy, used to go by the name of fairy tale princess but shortened it to Mindy after, she felt that people judged her name before they got to know her. Mindy is from Shenyang China, a city about four hours from Beijing by car. She is an only child. She came to Founders for her junior year. Her father is a businessman and her mother an English teacher. Mindy is from a well off Chinese family, but like Vanessa Fong found in “Only Hope,” wealthy by Chinese standards is not rich by American terms.

The wealthy teenagers and their parents, teachers and friends identified them as “wealthy.” Each of them had at least one parent in a managerial position, an apartment with at least four rooms in addition to the kitchen and bathroom, and at least two of three goods considered to be luxuries (the computer, the air conditioner and the microwave oven). These teenagers were wealthy only when compared with the vast majority of people in China. None of their families owned cars. They lived well in China, but their households' annual incomes were still less than the annual tuitions charged by most first world colleges. (Fong 2004: 31)

Mindy mentioned to me that she is on financial aid. Other than that however I did not enter into a conversation with Mindy about her wealth. I made inferences from cues she dropped in conversations and the clothes she wore. Mindy attended local Chinese schools prior to coming to Founders in eleventh grade, also a sign that her parents were not wealthy by Western standards cause she would have been enrolled in an international school. By her accounts she attended one of the top schools in her area, which prepared her well for the academic rigors of Founders. Mindy was deeply habituated in a Chinese habitus prior to coming to Founders, which seemed to create some roadblocks to her socialization process at Founders.
She is involved in Math team and the Chinese club. She does math team in the winter instead of a sport, ultimate Frisbee in the spring and club walking in the fall. A large part of the students' life at Founders is their involvement in clubs. This is a stark comparison to Devine, where he only mentions a school club once throughout his text. The lack of information on clubs put forth by Devine, shows the lack of involvement in the school by the students. Clubs also provide an opportunity for teachers to pass along cultural capital, since clubs makes students and teachers relate in a way different than the standard classroom teacher student relationship. By working together for the benefit of the club, teachers and students get to know each other better therefore making the transfer of cultural capital easier. Strong involvement in clubs also perpetuates the total institute aspect of the school. By having students participate in a school-overseen activity, teachers are able to keep watch over students who are in clubs and help mold their behavior, to one fitting of the institution.

Chapter 2: The Hallway

GOSSIP

I followed Samantha around for two days at Founders. I would watch her interact in class, with others in the hallway and during meals. During walks through the hallways she would frequently point out someone or something to me. Besides her pointing things out like the “odd quad,” she primarily focused on gossip; telling me a crazy story about X student or Y teacher. She seemed well verse in the gossip of the school. Founders is a small total institution where word travels fast. Because
the students are around each other constantly, rumors and gossip can become school wide knowledge in a matter of days.

It is important to note that I had a relationship with Samantha prior to doing my fieldwork. In China during the summer of 2010 she worked in an office building near mine. We would often eat lunch together. I met her through a mutual friend from Founders, in Beijing. By the end of the summer, we had become quite close. She was nervous about getting a belly ring, but wanted to get one. In order to calm her nerves she requested that I accompany her to get the piercing. I believe that this was a sign of me becoming a trusted friend of hers. I realized that my friendship with Samantha might cloud my observations of her, but the benefits of studying her could not be ignored. She was the only Chinese student I categorized as well engrained in the hegemonic culture of Founders. Her friendship with me also meant that she was more comfortable in discussing private information with me. My friendship meant that I would be treated more like a peer than authority figure, better allowing me study her daily routine without her being concerned about of what I saw or what I would do. I believe that her comfort with me was beneficial especially since my fieldwork was very limited in terms of time.

The hallways were a great place for Samantha to tell me about herself and her place at the school. Samantha’s favorite gossip to share with me was gossip about the teachers. She might have been more inclined to discuss teachers with me, since I might have seemed more interested in teacher gossip than student gossip. I am not sure if my reaction to the two sets of gossip was different. But I know that for me on a personal non-thesis interest the gossip about the teachers was more
interesting, since many of the teachers were the same from my time at the school.

The student gossip was more generic and the students who the gossip was about were anonymous as far as I was concerned due my lack of knowledge of the students. The following is an excerpt from my field notes detailing a conversation with Samantha.

A teacher walked by us as we walked from the computer lab on the second floor towards the dining hall on the first floor.

Samantha: Do you know Mrs. Trethaway?
Me: Yea, the teacher who just walked by?
Samantha: Yea, well did you hear about her and Mr. Walker?
Me: Mr. Walker, the geography teacher who is married to Mrs. Seplaki?
Samantha: Used to be married to Mrs. Seplaki. You didn’t hear they got a divorce?
Me: No way, they just got married when I came to Founders.
Samantha: Yea, well she had sex with Mr. Walker and now is going to get a divorce from her husband.

Students knowing the teachers’ gossip is not a new occurrence at Founders. There is a story an alumnus of Hotchkiss tells on pages 30-33 of “Hotchkiss A Chronicle of an American School,” Kolowrat, about how he once asked a faculty member about teacher gossip. The teacher reprimanded the student immediately, making sure the student knew he had stepped out of the line; that he was no longer behaving like a gentleman. This story took place in the mid fifties, and while the topic was not of a sexual nature it provides a context to show that the idea that students know about feuding teachers or teachers’ sexual relation is a part of the culture of Founders. The gossip about teachers is often shared amongst students but rarely between students and teachers.
I pushed Samantha on the idea of teacher gossip, how she used it and how she obtained it. Samantha never witnessed or received the gossip from teachers directly. The rumor mill provided the gossip for her. She was not sure how most of the teacher gossip made its way into the gossip grapevine, but she was sure that what she was telling me was common knowledge among the students. Most of the teachers’ gossip that was shared with me was of drunkenness, affairs or new relationships.

The hallways were a great place for me to see the student body, faculty and staff. When conversation between us would die down, I would ask about a person Samantha interacted with earlier. I was hoping to get gossip, or stories that could situation that person’s relationship with Samantha. Gossip as put forth by Alejandro Paz is a “how social identities and groupness might be linked to interactional genres like those called ‘gossip.’” (Paz 2008: 136) Gossip differs from rumors in that gossip is meant to be a form of bonding between people. Rumors on the other hand are meant for the masses and do not have the intention of bonding a group.

My first time meeting Mindy was during my first visit to Founders in February. This was not the first time that I had heard about Mindy. During the summer, in talking to Samantha about life at Founders, she told me stories about a Chinese girl at Founders who struggled to fit in to the place. It was not until after meeting Mindy and talking with Samantha that I realized that Mindy was the student that Samantha was talking about almost six months before in China.
The hallway was a great place to talk to Mindy about her life at Founders. But while the hallway proved a good space to talk since the students were not working, it was not the best place to speak since, distractions, like other teachers and students, would sometimes make Mindy or Samantha uncomfortable to speak freely. Mindy seemed less interested in gossip than Samantha. While walking the hallways, Mindy spent most of her time either running to her next engagement or talking to me about her understanding of the differences between America and China. I did try to push to see what gossip Mindy knew and how she told it. Even when being pushed to talk about gossip, Mindy avoided it. She seemed more interested in telling me what she has seen and how she understood it. The following is an excerpt from my field notes when I was trying to get Mindy to gossip.

While discussing dorm life, I asked Mindy how having a roommate was during her first year.

Me: So you had a roommate your first year right?
Mindy: Yes.
Me: Did you get along with her?
Mindy: We got along well.
Me: Do you still hang out with her?
(Mindy got quiet, before each answer after this point she hesitated before she spoke)
Mindy: No...
Me: Oh, how come? Did you just get along with her cause you had too?
Mindy: No, she was expelled.
Me: For what?
Mindy: Well she borrowed a friends’ debit card and bought clothes and stuff online with it. I think the school overreacted, I mean she could have paid the girl back and all would have been fine, but instead of the school trying to help her they kicked her out. I think that is wrong, this girl was depressed and needed help.
Me: So the theft was a cry for help.
Mindy: I think so. In China this situation would have been handled differently.
Mindy resisted the urge to really gossip about her roommate, instead of presenting me with the story in detail and build the drama; she gave me a brief overview. Even in subsequent tries on my part to find out more details about the expulsion, were met with quick changes of the topic. Mindy did not feel comfortable gossiping to me about students.

Samantha on the other hand was too happy to tell me the gossip about everyone. The hallway to her was a place to see and be seen. A part of that to her was gossiping about those who she saw. The unseen did not get gossiped about. Samantha did not see gossip as being a negative thing.

The following conversation took place after meeting Samantha’s self proclaimed best friend Cynthia, a half black half Asian Jamaican, who had been at Founders since Sophomore year.

Me: So that’s your best friend?
Samantha: Yea, she awesome. Her and I became close pretty quickly. She came in here with a boyfriend who came here as well. They decided to come to Founders together. They just broke up this year, so it has been fun wing manning with her.

Without even a prompt from me, Samantha gossiped about her best friend with me. She did not even seem to realize that she was gossiping. This information was not treated as private. This is a result of Founders being a total institution that strips away the private to form class cohesion.

“The founders of the school recognized that unless their sons and grandsons were willing to take up the struggle for the preservation of their class interests, privilege would slip from the hands of the elite... Thus the idea of taking boys [or girls], away from their mothers and placing them in barracks where their personal identities were stripped away.” (24 Cookson 1985)
Cynthia and the teachers were not the only topics of gossip that Samantha knew. Samantha seemed to know at least one good piece of gossip on everyone who walked down the hallway.

Samantha's favorite subjects of gossip were boys, hookups and crushes. “You know the faculty lounge is a new hook up spot. They leave the door unlocked a lot for some reason.” Samantha’s gossip tended to not stray far from these three topics, even if it the subject did not necessarily need to include those topics.

Me: He must play basketball.
Samantha: Yea, he’s going to Michigan. He came in as a Lower Mid (sophomore) but when he committed he changed grades and is now an Upper Mid (Junior). He goes out with a girl’s basketball player.

I got the sense that Samantha was not alone in her gossip focusing on people’s love lives. Cynthia and other friends of hers would contribute sex gossip whenever they got a chance. Even the most private part of people’s lives, their love lives seemed to be public domain.

USE OF SPACE

The hallways acted as more than a place of transit for Samantha. Like many other students at Founders Samantha hung out in the main hallway, colloquially called the Dean’s Wing, because it is outside of the Dean’s Wing. Main hallway is the stretch of hallway that runs from the Chapel to the dining hall, passing English and Philosophy classrooms, the learning center, English offices, the music wing, the radio station, the faculty lounge, the main entrance to main building, the deans wing, the student center, the snack bar, the international as well as summer programs
offices and the library. For obvious reasons, the main hallway is the busiest hallway on campus. Congestion occurs particularly around the Dean's Wing and Snack Bar. During her free periods, Samantha would either eat lunch or sit down against the wall that led to the actual Dean's Wing. Other friends of hers gathered here as well, including her best friend Cynthia. I ended up spending a great deal of time with Cynthia; Samantha and Cynthia seemed to be inseparable. Samantha told me that she “enjoy[ed] the Dean's Wing as a central gathering place, where if you waited long enough anyone you wanted to see would come through at some point.” She did not only hang out in the hallway to the Dean's Wing, she also tried to do homework a couple of times. The amount of work she actually accomplished while in the main hallway was minimal due the hustle and bustle of the place.

Though I did not witness much of it, Samantha told me that she hangs in the Snack Bar a good amount too. The Snack Bar is located along the Main Hallway adjacent to the Dean’s Wing. The Snack Bar is open when the dining hall is not. It is staffed by locals, who make short order meals like breakfast sandwiches, as well as hot dog and hamburgers. Locals are employed as chefs, janitors and other jobs around campus. “The physical operation of a prep school is a complex process involving all the problems of maintaining a small town and feeding a small army.” (Cookson 1985: 28) A total institution of more than 500 people requires a strong staff of locals who, do not teach the students but make the school a place where the students can learn and socialize without having to worry about the lawn, or food. When it is open the snack bar expands the Dean’s Wing becoming another popular hang out for students. The snack bar is in a rectangular shape. Its length runs
beside main hallway. It has a large window that looks out onto main hallway allowing for visual interaction between those inside and those in the hallway. In the middle of the snack bar there is a short partition with booths for eating on either side. On each side of the booths there are tables. The partition divides the snack bar physically and by grades. Lowerclassmen are expected to eat and hangout on the side of the partition furthest away from the main hallway. Upperclassmen sit closest to main hallway. Seniors primarily sit in the tables next to the windows of the snack bar though juniors can sit there as well. Samantha told me that she has always obeyed the rules of the snack bar. “No one has ever threaten me, or forced me to sit in a certain spot. I dunno, I just sat where my grade was seated when I first came. Then over time I just learned the seating. I don’t know how preps (Freshmen) learn, maybe they are told in orientation.” Through this quote Samantha demonstrated one of the many ways in which she has been habituated into the habitus of Founders. She performed actions without knowing the why, but acted as if was apparent all along.

Mindy on the other hand did not linger in the hallway or snack bar the same way Samantha did. I followed Mindy as she walked through the Dean’s Wing area of main hallway many times. She never stopped to hang out or talk to people in this area of the school.

Me: So where do you hang out in Main Building?
Mindy: The Dining Hall and sometimes in what’s called the odd quad. Do you know what that is? Was it here when you went here?
Me: Yea, it was here when I went here. Do you hang out there often?
Mindy: No not often, but if I hang out somewhere besides for the Dining Hall in Main Building that is where I hang out.
Me: Why do you hang out in the odd quad and not in the Dean’s Wing?
Mindy: I find the people in the odd quad more accepting of differences, you know. They don’t care how you dress, how you talk or what your background is. They are just interested in you as a person. They are less judgmental.

The odd quad is a group of couches in the lower level of the main building near the theater, where students who do not fit into the hegemonic culture of Founders. They are situated far from the Dean’s Wing and the Snack Bar. The only other group of students who hung out in Main Building but away from the Dean’s Wing were the black students. They hung out and spent time on couches near the Radio Station.

Mindy told me that she considered much of her time in the Dining Hall to be socializing.

Mindy: It’s nice to gather over meals. We are all very busy but we must eat, so it’s [the dining hall] a good place to hang out and eat. 
Me: Do you leave the dining hall with friends to go hang out?
Mindy: No, we usually go our separate ways after meals. We all are very busy.

Mindy saw the Dining Hall and her time there as social time. She never planned to meet anyone there, she told me. But she “knows that someone she knows will be there or be coming along soon.” Mindy claimed to not have a set table in the Dinning Hall, “We sit wherever is available.”

Samantha also socialized in the dining hall. She never mentioned the dining hall as a place of socialization when asked. She did detail to me the seating arrangement in the dining hall. “My volleyball team used to always sit here (a table long table towards the back of the dining hall) after practice. It was a lot of fun to
have the whole team sit together.” Samantha had groups of friends who she went to
the dining hall with.

  Samantha: I tend to sit at the same couple of tables.
  Me: Is that because you have to sit there.
  Samantha: Naw, its just cause <pause> well no one makes us sit there
  we just do.

Much like the snack bar, Samantha has internalized the order of seating in the dining
hall. She knows her place in it and everyone else’s too, but lacks the knowledge of
why. From what I was able to ascertain during my studies at Founders and
subsequent visits, is that the seating in the Dining Hall is set up so that boys do not
have to mind their manners while eating around girls and vice versa.

  The Dean’s Wing and Main Hallway, aside from the dorm, is the primary
place that students socialize. It is the only place that groups of boys and girls hang
out together. The Dean’s Wing is treated like living rooms in most homes. I saw
students lounging, with feet on the furniture, eating, tussling and acting as if they
were in their own home. Bags were strewn across the floor and computers were left
out without second thought. No one seemed to be worried about theft. The
students converted a very formal setting into a casual, homely atmosphere.

  Besides for being a place of comfort for the students, I noticed that the Dean’s
Wing seemed to be a place where social capital was exchanged. At Founders, it
seemed that for the students the most powerful form of social capital was gossip.
The more one knew signified their place in the social hierarchy of the school. Due to
the value of gossip, most students I witnessed did not share gossip with other
students unless the other student could provide more gossip or was affected by the gossip.

Samantha was more than willing to share gossip with me, even though I had very little to give in return. It is important to note that I exchanged gossip capital with Samantha when I would share stories about the teachers I knew when I was here. Even if Samantha had heard some of the stories before, she still seemed to hold out for some information that she did not previously know. In one situation when I told her about a teacher who was rumored to have slept with some hockey players, she beamed and smiled. Without saying a word to me her facial and body reaction showed me that she understood that she had gained valuable gossip that she could use to maintain or even improve her social status. Regardless of whether my gossip was true or not, Samantha was fishing for any old stories that could still carry weight with her friends that might have been forgotten with the passing of time.

The value of gossip at Founders is that it informs the students of what is acceptable. When students first arrive at Founders they may know only a few people and very little about the school. Most of the Chinese students I interviewed did not visit the school before they came. They only knew what they had read online or learned through their interactions with the school. By hearing gossip, however they gain knowledge about the school. Gossip teaches the students what has been gotten away with in the past. This is an indirect way that students learn what they can and cannot get away with doing at school. During my time at school a teacher caught a student doing whip its. Whip its are when people inhale the gas that pressurizes whip cream and other pressurized cans. Supposedly it gives a
lightheaded euphoric sensation to the user. When word got around school that the student had been caught, gossip spread like wild fire, some said the student was going to get expelled, some said the student had already withdrawn and others said the school couldn’t do anything since there was no rule against it in the school rule book, the Blue Book. In the end the student was put on General probation, meaning that he was going to get expelled if he slipped up again. After the verdict the school gossip mill went crazy again, this time with the rumor that a new rule had been created that was meant to keep up with the every changing world around the school. The new rule got a nickname, called the O’her rule (named after the student), stated that if anything was done that was against the ethos of the school a student may be dismissed for that infraction. This was previously impossible and since the rule was grandfathered into place, the student was able to stay at Founders. I used this example of how rumors have truths and half-truths as a way to show how students use gossip and rumors to entertain and inform themselves as well as others. Students had effectively communicated that even if something was not banned by the Blue Book a student could still be expelled for it, all before the school had republished the rules.

The relationship between the school and students is not the only topic of gossip. Gossip also informs the students about the different social dynamics at Founders. What the gossip is about and who is involved often position a student in the hierarchy of Founders.

Samantha: He’s a senior and he went out with a freshman for the first couple of weeks of school
Cynthia: That was before she realized that no one likes him.
Samantha: She just knew he was on varsity football.
I did not personally know the senior. I picked up on the prevalent theme of their conversation, that he was an outcast who sought acceptance among his peers, to no avail.

Gossip does not just inform the students of what a student’s position at the school is; it also bonds the students. Most students do not come to Founders knowing many people at the school. But by learning gossip and spreading gossip about people at Founders they are able to learn more about their surroundings while exchanging information that brings them closer with their fellow student with whom they are sharing the gossip. Most of the interactions I witnessed between Samantha and Cynthia were exchanges of gossip, amongst themselves and with me. They used gossip as a way to be closer to one another, by finishing or adding to each other’s rumors or by listening intently and commenting on new unheard gossip.

Samantha tailored the stories she told me to fit my interest. When I first began to follow her around she would tell me whatever popped into her head. As my time with her progressed, however, she began to narrow the topics of her gossip to my interest, which I believe she determined by my reactions to her gossip. By the end of my time with Samantha she stuck to telling me gossip about the lacrosse team, hockey team, other Chinese students and teachers. During my time following her, I tried to not show more interest in one topic over the other, but the way that she curtailed her gossip to my interest by the end showed me that I was unsuccessful at controlling my interest.

Much of the discussion that Samantha entered into with other students was gossip. Once Samantha or the other student was done the conversation would
usually die out. I do not believe that the students in most instances would have entered into the conversation unless they had gossip to exchange. This can be isolating for people who are not privy to gossip.

Mindy was not privy to much gossip. She seemed to have a negative view of gossip from the start due to the way she spoke about gossip and the students at Founders. “Students here are so judgmental. They judge you before they even met or talk to you. If you don’t dress exactly right, or have the proper interest than they judge you.” But I believe that her negative feelings towards gossip are much deeper than believing that gossip is morally wrong. I believe that she had a difficult time adjusting to Founders. This difficulty adapting meant that she was not able to be a part of the gossip mill early on, preventing her from gossiping with others after she became comfortable since she had no gossip capital to share with others. This inability to gossip with others, I believe has led Mindy to see gossip as judgmental, mean and harmful. The friends whom Mindy has do not gossip as much or in the same way as most of Founders, this is why she does not hang out in the snack bar or Dean’s Wing.

Samantha, on the other hand, did not see gossip as morally negative. Instead gossiping was how she related, fit in and found her place at Founders. To Samantha gossiping was an inclusive activity that built friendships and entertained. Gossip was also an exclusionary activity in that it separated Samantha and her group of friends from other students at Founders.

Each student’s personal view of gossip shaped her relation with main building and the dean’s wing. The way Samantha lingered in the halls, strolled to
class and stopped to talk to anyone, showed her comfort at Founders. The ways she navigated the hallways was in contrast to the way Mindy did. Mindy would sprint from place to place, even if she was not late. The only time Mindy would stop in along the Dean's Wing was when a student or faculty member who recognized me and approached me. Never did we stop along the most populated part of Main Building for her to converse. Mindy appeared very uncomfortable in these exclusively social settings. The only time Mindy paused in navigating her way through the Dean's Wing was when a student or teacher stopped me, never her.

The student’s relation with “main” also demonstrated the habitus of Founders in that it is valued to look like you aren’t trying too hard, but can succeed nonetheless. This idea of casually succeeding was formulated by Cookson. Parents push the students to succeed, as do the schools, yet the students feel pressure from each other to hang out and socialize. The school day at Founders is already packed with classes and sports. Add an hour or more of homework per class per night and the workload can add up even if a student does not socialize. But the students are expected to socialize “For students, the major aspect of their education seems to be social, not simply academic.” (Cookson 1985: 106 ) Students understand the need to be academically successful in order to gain entrance into a top-flight college, yet they also feel the pressure to socialize. These two pressures are almost at odds with each other, and only a few students end up being very popular and on the honor roll. When glancing at the Honor roll that was listed next to the Dean’s Wing I noticed that the majority of names appeared to be Asian. The dominance of Asian’s in the classroom did not seem to extend out to the social sphere. Most of my trips through
the Dean’s Wing, where most of the strongest culturally habituated students hang out, Samantha was the only Asian I noticed.

Terence Turner calls the clothing a person’s social skin. “Man is born naked but everywhere in clothes. Dress reveals as much as it conceals.” (Turner 1979: 822) What a person wears and how they wear it dictate how they are perceived and relate to others. “Dress then becomes a reflection of the way you see yourself in society.” (Turner 1979: 822) As I mentioned earlier the clothing a student wears is an expression of the amount they fit into the culture of Founders. Everyday I met Samantha, she was dressed the part of a Founders student. She either wore skirts and stockings or corduroy pants. The clothes that she wore fit her well and complimented her body. Her clothes did not stand out but blended in with the rest of the student body. Mindy on the other hand appeared to be out of sync with the fashion styles of Founders. The days I met with Mindy she was always wearing improperly fitted clothing, with loud colors that were not pastels. The clothes she wore made her look bigger than she was and drew attention to all the wrong parts of her body. The style of Founders’ girls is not made for chubby girls like Mindy. The button down oxfords do not allow for many curves. Big thighs and butts also do not fit into the khakis and corduroy pants that are a favorite of girls at Founders. For these reasons Mindy was not able to dress like the other girls at Founders and instead left on her own for fashion choices, which did not fit into the hegemonic style of Founders. Samantha’s social skin was muted typical preppy wear while Mindy’s was loud, ill fitting and different. It was much easier to find Mindy in a crowded hallway than Samantha, even though Samantha was taller. “The point I
have sought to demonstrate is that the most fundamental structural principles of Kayapo society are systematically articulated and as it were “played out” on the bodies of every member of the Kayapo society.” (Turner 1979: 823) Mindy and Samantha by their dress are showing where they reside in the social hierarchy of Founders.

Mindy and Samantha had very different experience of the Dining Hall. Mindy saw the dining hall as a place where the most of her socialization was done. Samantha on the other hand recognized the social aspect to eating a meal with others, but her purpose in the dinning hall was to eat. She had other places where she went to socialize. The avenues to socialize in Main Building were slim for students who did not frequent the Dean’s Wing. I had a Chinese alumnus from Founders tell me how he was afraid of the Dean’s Wing, he felt uncomfortable there. He would race through the Dean’s Wing any time he had to travel through and would avoid it when possible. His fear of the Dean’s Wing meant that he socialized in his dorm, but even then he really only hung out with one or two other students.

The hallways of Founders represent different things to Samantha and Mindy. Mindy views the hallways in a more utilitarian fashion, as a thoroughfare to move from class to class. Samantha used the hallways to socialize, gossip and make friends. The function that the hallway plays for each student affects their place within the hegemonic culture of Founders.
Chapter 3: China

ON BEING CHINESE

Samantha and Mindy are very different people. They grew up in different environments and different cities. The largest piece of commonality between the two of them is their home country, China. Both students are 100% Chinese, but they view their Chineseness differently.

Me: How does being Chinese affect you here?  
Samantha: It doesn’t.  
Me: I find that hard to believe. Do people know you are Chinese?  
Samantha: Yea, but I’m not treated any differently than anyone else here.  
Me: Do you identify as Chinese?  
Samantha: Yes and no. I look Chinese. I speak Chinese. My parents are Chinese. But I don’t hang out with Chinese kids, here or in Shanghai. I have gone to international schools my whole life, so I was never really truly brought up like most Chinese, so it don’t feel a strong connection to them.

Samantha sees her being Chinese as neither a disadvantage nor advantage at Founders. To her it is merely her ethnic background and where her family lives. Her past education in a non-country specific culture, that of an international school, has prevented Samantha from strongly identifying with China or the States.

Mindy on the other hand feels very strong Chinese pride. She identifies as Chinese, speaks Chinese and views herself as a representative of China at Founders. Mindy’s friends are primarily Chinese or non-western international students.

Mindy: Asians and other international students are less judgmental than most of the kids here. They are more interested in the person than how cool or uncool you are. They are more academic. I pick my friends based on who they are as a person and that’s why I am friends with them.
To Mindy, her being Chinese plays into everything she does at Founders. She takes an active role in Chinese activities at school. She was at the forefront of the movement to remove the Tibetan flag from among its place next to country flags of the countries that are represented by the students at the school. Earlier this school year, the coordinator of International Programs, Mr. David Robinson, found out that a student at Founders had parents from Tibet. He thought that it would be fitting then to include the Tibetan flag in a series of flags that hangs from the rafters of the Dining Hall and symbolizes the countries represented by the student body of the school.

The hanging of the Tibetan flag in the dining hall was not expected by the faculty to upset the Chinese students. But, Mindy took offense to the hanging of the flag. “If every state that had a student here had a flag to represent the student then I wouldn’t mind the Tibetan flag. But that’s not the way it is. And Tibet is the equivalent of a state in China so it shouldn’t be hung next to countries’ flags.” Mindy saw it as her role as a Chinese person to object to the hanging of the Tibetan flag. To her it was if the flag symbolized the Tibetan separatist movement, which was anti her government. Mindy was not the only Chinese student to be upset by the hanging of the Tibetan flag. Not all were as vocal as Mindy however. Samantha did not care about the flag. “It doesn’t affect me so I don’t really care.” In the end the school hung the Tibetan flag in a different section of the school, next to the Quebecois flag. “We created a separate section for cultural flags and national flags.” Said Mr. Robinson. The separation of the Tibetan flags from the other flags in the Dining Hall
only took place after outside speakers on came in to speak with the students about the issue and one student made a documentary on the issue at Founders.

Mindy’s and Samantha’s opposing views of what being Chinese means to them puts them at odds with one another. Both students were interested in my research and were curious about who else I was studying. When I told Samantha I was studying Mindy, she laughed and said, “well that should be interesting. She’s a character.” Mindy was equally dismissive of Samantha. Last year Samantha and Mindy lived in the same dorm. In the dorm they got to know as much about the other as they cared to know. The rest of their information on the other was based on rumors.

Samantha did not like Mindy, because to her Mindy was weird.

Samantha: I mean she named herself Cinderella. Who does that? I heard that on the first day of classes when everyone was introducing themselves, that she gave a ten minute speech, talking about how she was here to find her Prince Charming. Supposedly it was hilarious.

Samantha views Mindy as an outsider at Founders, someone who does not fit into the culture of the place. So to position herself as a person well versed in the habitus of Founders she made fun of and looked down on Mindy. For there to be an inside there needs to be an outside.

Another mean story she told about Mindy was of Mindy’s blood stained sheets. Mindy, according Samantha, never took care of her period properly and always had nasty blood stains on her bed, some even on her pillow. Samantha’s description of Mindy was of someone who did not have the basic hygiene and social skills to fit in at any school. To Samantha anyone who hung out with Mindy was social poison and to be avoided.
Mindy viewed Samantha just as negatively as Samantha viewed her. Mindy told me that, “Samantha is a bad friend, she will make a friend then if she doesn’t think they are cool enough she will ignore them and end the friendship. This is not very Chinese.” Mindy made a point to identify Samantha as not Chinese. “She went to an international school so she doesn’t hang out with the Chinese kids who didn’t.” Talking about Samantha made Mindy angry, her face got red and she spoke with force and disdain.

Samantha and Mindy’s dislike of each other stems from their complex position in the international hierarchy. Mindy strongly identifies as Chinese and sees Samantha’s behavior as unbecoming. As a response to how Mindy sees Samantha, she has tried to distance herself from Samantha as much as possible. To her Samantha is a bad Chinese person.

Samantha’s disdain of Mindy, stems from her lack of identity as cultural Chinese. She and Mindy hold none of the same values. Samantha sees Mindy as being overly Chinese to the point where Samantha believes that Mindy cannot properly function at Founders. Mindy, according to Samantha, over emphasizes her Chineseness. “Everyone here is from a different place. But most of them can fit in.” Samantha is not embarrassed about being Chinese, but she believes that Mindy and other Chinese students do not try to fit into the habitus of Founders, isolating themselves. She blames the pariah as being responsible for her own rejection.

Both students I shadowed saw the other as a bad Chinese person. They tried to distance themselves from the other as a way to reject the others behavior. They spoke poorly of each other as a way to try to affect my view of the other.
Conclusion

Samantha and Mindy were two different Chinese students at Founders especially in the way they interact among their peers. Their process of socialization along with their current place in the social hierarchy at Founders was different. Each personality, due to their prior knowledge, especially the knowledge learned from home and previous schools, interacted and fit into the hegemonic culture of Founders in their own way. Their position in the social hierarchy was unique to each but represents the different ways that students can become habituated to Founders. How each student adjusted to the demands of an elite boarding school environment was determined by their prior knowledge. Much of this prior knowledge takes the form habitus, which is knowledge that is engrained in our non-conscious actions.

Each student’s class origins, intensity of their nationalism and relationship to the elite affected their time at Founders. It was most prominently displayed in the dress, use of space and utilization of gossip. Most notably it was in the way that the students dealt with wealth; their own wealth and the wealth that surrounded them. There is no one-way to socialize at Founders as I have shown through my personal experiences and those of Mindy and Samantha. However there is very little personal agency in how one fits into the hegemonic culture of the institution. This is not to say people completely lack agency but a student’s prior learning constricts the amount of agency that they have over their social career at Founders.